

## A Chaplain in "The 'Stan"

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It's hard to believe that almost a full year has passed since the Marines of the 26<sup>th</sup> Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU) entered Afghanistan. In mid-December 2001, I deployed as the 26<sup>th</sup> MEU Chaplain with other members of the MEU's Command Element, Battalion Landing Team (BLT), MEU Service Support Group (MSSG) and Air Combat Element (ACE) into Kandahar International Airport in Afghanistan. Shortly thereafter, the BLT chaplain and the MSSG chaplain joined us. We and our Religious Program Specialists made our temporary "home" there, and together formed a formidable Religious Ministry Team for our forward deployed forces.

I've been asked to put down a few thoughts (using the "20-20 hindsight" that always comes after an event) about our experiences at Kandahar, and what I would do differently if I had the chance to repeat the experience. The first item is not so much a "lesson learned" as a reaffirmation of something already understood by most chaplains: whether conducting a formal worship service or simply visiting the troops, a chaplain's ministry is eagerly awaited and most welcome. Walking into a "shop" or other working area, or crouching down to talk to troops in their "fighting holes," the chaplain was always greeted warmly and listened to with great interest. Being in dangerous surroundings may have caused the troops to be more open than ever to the chaplains as the perceived representatives of God. All of the chaplains in our team experienced a heavy response to all worship services, formal or informal, weekday or weekend. The desire for the Almighty was very evident.

Another lesson is that the opportunity to contact and foster goodwill among the civilian population through Community Relations (COMREL) projects may be limited. Due to force protection measures (American and coalition forces were under fire during most of our stay at Kandahar), COMRELS were not organized in the first few weeks of our time there. It was probably wise to delay outreach programs until conditions were more stable; the MEU would not be well served by well-meaning chaplains and troops who got themselves killed or seriously injured.

The command was well served by chaplains in the area of welfare and morale. There was no Morale, Welfare and Recreation department set up in Kandahar, so the chaplains readily took on this role. This was critical because there was a great outpouring of generosity from the American people in the form of letters, small gifts and sweet treats sent to our personnel in Afghanistan. The chaplain became the contact person for all the people at home who wanted to express their support with letters and "goodies." And it was the Religious Ministry Team that distributed the bounty and penned the "thank you's." Morale shot up with the reception of the gifts from home. This was one more way the Religious Ministry Teams assisted the command.

Another lesson learned was that potentially serious religious problems can arise suddenly, but chaplain intervention can defuse them quickly and easily. For example, some of the coalition forces inadvertently set up their office and sleeping areas in buildings reserved for Muslim prayer and meditation. Some of the Sailors with the MEU who were Muslim noticed what had happened and brought it to my attention. I spoke to the commanding officer who immediately designated these sites as "off limits" except for those who would use the spaces for prayer. His quick action calmed the religious sensibilities of our American Muslims and



enhanced good relations with the native Afghans who worked with us. Once again, they had places set apart for their daily prayer observances.



We also learned that the media can be useful. The relationship between military and media does not have to be “adversarial.” The media in Afghanistan provided continual coverage of the War on Terrorism for people all over the globe to see. Rather than avoiding the media, I invited reporters to report on our religious ministry. What better way to get the message to the folks back home that the spiritual needs of our troops were being met than to use the media resources already at hand?

The media reported on our religious worship services, especially at the Christmas and New Year holiday period. Many members of the press and television crews actually took part in the worship services. As a result, when a chaplain conducted memorial services for Marines killed in the line of duty in Afghanistan and Pakistan, the media who gave worldwide coverage were not strangers to us. They made it clear to everyone that the fighting forces involved in Operation Enduring Freedom were being cared for spiritually, as well as physically and emotionally.

What would I do differently if I had the chance to repeat the experience? One thing I would do would be to bring more supplies with me “in country.” I took only one 30-day mount-out box

with me because I had not expected our stay to last as long as it did. After all (I reasoned) the MEU was located almost twice as far inland as the normal expeditionary operation would go. And we were told that the Army and Air Force would relieve us before long. As it turned out, some of our religious supplies began to run short at the 30-day point. Fortunately, our logistic chain back to the ship where our supplies were located was excellent, and we had little trouble getting re-supplied. When going ashore, it is better to have more supplies than needed than to risk running short of materials that you might have trouble replenishing in a timely manner.



In sum, the MEU’s time in Afghanistan was spent in a difficult and dangerous operation under austere conditions. Yet I’m confident that all the chaplains deployed there would do it again “in a heartbeat” because the experience was so good and the opportunities for ministry were so numerous. What a great opportunity we Navy chaplains have to do ministry that makes a difference. We have the opportunity to represent the presence of God to our forces as they fight to bring peace and ensure freedom in our world!